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TOWARD A NEW DEFENSE STRATEGY

By Stansfield Turner

When the coming version of any weapons system appears to be virtually the ultimate in cost and sophistication, like our new tanks and aircraft carriers, one can safely assume that the evolution of that system is well past its peak. The best battleships, for example, were built during World War II, well after their usefulness had been eclipsed by the airplane and the submarine. Since the end of World War II, the United States has designed and trained its military forces almost exclusively to defend Western Europe. Concentration on this single threat has produced military equipment that is large and complex. It is not likely that it could be shifted quickly enough to other vital regions, such as the Persian Gulf.

When military forces are designed for only one kind of battle, a nation becomes vulnerable to other kinds of battle. There will be more areas of concern to the United States in the years ahead than just the Persian Gulf and Europe. If we want to be ready to play our role in them, we need forces that are strong and are useful in many different applications. We should design and build equipment and train our troops both to satisfy NATO's requirements to sustain combat with traditional, heavy forces and to have the flexibility, lightness and mobility that we would need for contingencies elsewhere. We need to rethink our overall strategy and, capitalizing on the innovative and technological genius of American industry, we need to shift from building weapons systems that are useful only in traditional, major continental warfare to systems that will serve a wider range of needs.

The potential for conflict in the Persian Gulf today is a good example. President Carter asserted in January 1980 that the United States would protect its interests in the Persian Gulf with military force if necessary. The Reagan Administration has confirmed that commitment.

To strengthen our preparedness in the Persian Gulf, we are working to acquire rights-to-military bases in the Middle East; we are negotiating with governments in the region for permission to keep American forces there, and we are trying to persuade our principal allies to play a role alongside us. These responses to the problem simply perpetuate the same approach we have followed in Europe for the last 36 years. But the Persian Gulf is not Europe. In Europe, it is clear that the threat is from the Warsaw Pact forces positioned across the border between West Germany and its eastern neighbors. Our allies do not question the need to have bases for American forces on their soil; nor is there any doubt that they will be in it with us if a war starts.

In the Persian Gulf, however, we do not know exactly who the enemy may be or where he may attack. Perhaps we may face a massive Soviet attack to capture Iran's oil fields, or perhaps an internal rebellion in some key oil-producing area, or perhaps a thrust by one Arab country into another that would jeopardize our oil supplies.

Acquiring the rights to use and occupy military bases in the Middle East is not the solution to the problem. First, it would be unwise to mortgage vital American interests to the political judgment of another nation. We certainly should not consider intervening anywhere, unless a vital national interest is at stake. But should that occasion arise, the host country might simply appraise the situation differently, and not permit us to engage in combat from its soil. Second, once we do establish some set of bases, the chances are very high that they will not be well enough placed for the crises that actually arise. To be operationally useful, bases have to be very close to the area of action. For combat aircraft, this would be within 300 to 400 miles. For ground combat forces, it could not be much more than 100 miles if they were to be introduced in a timely manner. Likely scenarios in the Persian Gulf demonstrate the problem well, but they are by no means the only scenarios that may concern us.

To begin with, the most demanding need for military force in this region would be to oppose a direct thrust by the Soviets into Iran. A Soviet conquest

of Iran would change the political complexion of the Persian Gulf overnight. With the Soviets adjacent to the oil fields of Iraq and Kuwait, they would be only a short distance from the oil of Saudi Arabia and would be able to command the north shore of the Strait of Hormuz through which all oil flows out of the gulf. The free world's energy supply would soon be hostage to the Soviet Union, giving Moscow a degree of leverage over us attainable in no other way short of all-out war.

A Soviet attempt at the conquest of Iran could not go unchallenged by the United States and its allies. After considering all other alternatives to arrest such a move by the Soviets, we might decide that the stakes were high enough to warrant the use of force. Our objective in intervening would not be to defeat a full and sustained Soviet drive to capture all of Iran — that would probably be impossible on the Soviets' back doorstep — but to seize quickly the southern oil-producing portion of Iran before the Soviets could establish a viable military presence there.

There are 700 rugged miles separating the Soviet Union from Iran's oil fields. To be in position before the Soviets could arrive in strength, we would have to move into place in just a few days. This would necessitate staging through an airfield in southern Iran itself, because Oman, Saudi Arabia and Egypt are all too far away. Tanks introduced into the nearest airfield in Saudi Arabia, for instance, would be 400 miles away and would take hopelessly long to get into action. In short, for this scenario we cannot count on prearranged bases being close enough; and there is no present possibility of negotiating for base rights in Iran.

A second situation that might endanger vital American interests would be a rebellion or a terrorist action that threatened oil supplies. Such a possibility is not unlikely in Middle Eastern nations that are undergoing rapid cultural and economic change and are exposed to subversive actions by both Soviet clients in the area, such as South Yemen, and radical Arab groups, such as the Palestine Liberation Organization. A rebellion, if not suppressed in its incipient stages, could get out of hand easily, acquire a momentum of its own and then probably not be controlled. If we were asked to help, we would have to move in very quickly to do any good. Since we cannot predict where such a disturbance might arise, prearranged

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bases are not likely to be right at hand, or if they are, they might fall under the control of the revolutionaries and we would have to fight our way into them.

In a third type of situation, an intraregional war that threatened to disrupt oil supplies, local bases presumably would be made available to us by the country we were defending. Still, if better ones were to be had, we might want to be able to acquire facilities that we had not anticipated or could not have arranged in advance. All this is not to say that advance arrangements for bases to store supplies of fuel, or to refuel transport aircraft, or to prepare forces for combat, would not be useful. We must recognize, however, that such arrangements are unlikely to satisfy our key operational combat requirements in a time of crisis. We are going to have to obtain locally what we require for operations when we are ready to move, and be prepared to sustain ourselves and effect any needed buildup in force from at least as far away as Europe. An even more fundamental consideration regarding the utility of bases is, as mentioned above, that the Persian Gulf will not be our only area of concern in the years ahead.

If we look back at the record since World War II, the United States has been repeatedly surprised at where its vital national interests seemed to be:

■ We hardly anticipated Korea in 1950. Our inability quickly to move sufficient force there led to our being pushed back to the edge of the sea before we could struggle back, many bloody and costly battles later.

■ After Korea, we never thought we would place military forces onto the Asian mainland again. Then came Vietnam. Again, we were slow off the mark, largely because our training, organization and equipment were tailored to a traditional European war, not an Asian guerrilla war.

■ After Vietnam, we virtually eschewed the idea that we had any vital interests abroad, except in Western Europe. Yet less than seven years later, President Carter spelled out our vital interests in the Persian Gulf.

If we look ahead, we can see there are numerous dangerous situations in which our economic or political concerns might lead to a decision that vital national interests are involved:

■ Thailand is currently threatened at its Cambodian border by 200,000 troops of the Soviet Union's surrogate, Vietnam.

■ Pakistan is under increasing threat and pressure from the Soviet Union as a result of its alleged support for the Afghan freedom fighters.

■ Our supply of a number of critical minerals is today already at risk as tensions mount between the black nations of Southern Africa and the white Union of South Africa.

■ Our own economic and political involvement with the rest of the world has increased, making us more vulnerable to cartels like the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries and extortionists like Iran — concerns we were hardly aware of 10 years ago.

■ In the future, we may judge some situation in the third world to involve a vital interest other than essential resources, such as oil. Between 1975 and 1980, the Soviets intervened in Angola, Ethiopia, Cambodia and Afghanistan. In retrospect, it might have been in our interest to have attempted to arrest their movements into those areas.

It is shortsighted to believe that we can predict today any better than we have in the past where our future vital interests will lie. Those judgments will continue to evolve and change. It is precisely for this reason that our military preparations must be more flexible than fixed bases, such as those in Europe.

Similarly, the concept of prepositioning American forces in the Middle East, as is currently being discussed, is a knee-jerk reversion to the European strategy. We could not possibly station enough forces permanently in the area to stand off a Soviet invasion of Iran, or even a lesser military assault by indigenous forces. Certainly it would help to have some American troops in the Middle East, if we could be sure they would not be held hostage at the moment of need by a disapproving host country. But we can neither solve our problem this way nor should we pay a high price to try to do so. (There would be a very high price throughout the Arab world if we pressured Egypt into permitting us to station a few troops at bases in Sinai.)

Another approach to the problem, that of relying on our allies to share this burden, is to be desired but not counted on. We should encourage them to contribute to a quick-reaction force, especially in its naval elements, because this would be relatively easy for them to do. Some of our allies, like France, already have a standing naval presence in the Indian Ocean. It is logical and has the appeal of internationalizing whatever action might be taken. But there are severe limitations on what other forces the allies could provide. Only the United Kingdom, France, Italy and West Germany have the capa-

bility to provide modest mobile forces and, in the case of West Germany, there is a constitutional question as to whether German forces can be sent outside the Federal Republic. And, as with basing rights, there will always be the question of whether our allies will agree with us that the time has come to use military force. Coalitions are fine in wartime when there is no question that the interests of all the allies coincide, but are not often effective in deciding whether or not to go to war.

If we cannot count on prearranged bases, or on prepositioned forces, or on prenegotiated support from our allies, what should we do? We should agree on a new three-part strategy. First, we need a capability to move in quickly and with force to airfields that are close enough to the action and that may be endangered by rebellious or hostile forces. Second, we need an immediate follow-on airlift capability to reinforce that seizure. And, last, we need to be able to dispatch supporting logistics by sea quickly. We are not now adequately prepared for any of these tasks. Having tailored our military forces to the European scenario, we have failed to provide the flexibility and mobility that are indispensable for an interventionist role in other areas of the world. However, we can immediately improve each of these capabilities by reorienting in fundamental ways our approach to the building and training of forces.

For seizing airfields, we can turn either to the Army's airborne forces or Navy-Marine Corps amphibious forces. For initial intervention in areas remote from major American bases, it would be risky to count on airborne forces. Their limitation to a radius of about 500 miles from a jumping-off base would tie us to the need for a friendly base in the immediate area. The role of airborne forces is more to reach out in advance of a sizeable, ongoing ground operation, not to be the spearhead for initiating a seizure, but we still should keep them in mind and well trained in case circumstances happen to be just right.

Seizure operations — the assault landing by boat and helicopter — are the forte and the raison d'être of Navy-Marine Corps amphibious forces. Their equipment is designed for mobility and surprise and they are trained for the initial seizure of a limited piece of hostile territory, like an airfield or coastal foothold. However, they have two key limitations. First, their ability to seize an initial objective that is more than 50 miles inland is questionable. Fortunately, most of the countries of likely concern to us have a coastline. Second,

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the ships of an amphibious force are slow. Good intelligence is essential for the timely dispatch of an amphibious force to a trouble area in time.

Once established ashore, an amphibious spearhead requires rapid reinforcement if it is to hang onto its toehold. This means rapid follow-on by airlift, not by the traditional follow-on waves of amphibious shipping. Today, quick seizure by forward-deployed forces and immediate follow-up by airlift best meets our needs for rapid response. The Marines should keep their large-scale assault plans dusted off but they should be truly ready to move fast and travel light.

To be ready for their seizure role in remote areas, the Marines also need to change the way they deploy forward in peacetime. For years, they have kept about 1,500 to 1,800 troops forward in the Mediterranean and a like number in the Western Pacific. Such forces are marginal in size by Marine Corps estimates for any but the most elementary combat mission, such as a raid or a rescue mission. If it came to securing even a lightly defended airfield, 1,800 troops would more than have their hands full. A meaningful combat assault in the Mediterranean or Pacific, then, by these deployed forces would have to await reinforcement from the United States.

Today, we have shifted those deployed forces one at a time to the Indian Ocean to be ready for contingencies. In today's unsettled Persian Gulf, it would be better to deploy them both to the Indian Ocean permanently, doubling the number readily available. Since meaningful amphibious operations in the Mediterranean or the Western Pacific would have to await reinforcing forces from the United States anyway, our readiness for significant amphibious assaults in those areas would not drop. We would, though, be ready for an assault in the Indian Ocean area with 3,600 Marines. If 1,800 Marines can't do the job, could 3,600? Without a specific situation in mind, it is impossible to say. But the Marine Corps has traditionally held that a Marine amphibious brigade of about that size is the small-

est tactical unit for sustained combat. Certainly, 3,600 would have at least twice the probability of success of the present 1,800.

For the Marines, a continuous life aboard ship with little opportunity to train and exercise ashore, as is the case in the Indian Ocean, could lead to their capability deteriorating. One solution would be a rotation system that took advantage of the fact that airlift can move troops, but not equipment, very rapidly. Once deployed, two-thirds of these 3,000 to 4,000 Marines could be airlifted back to the United States from our island base at Diego Garcia, but they would leave all of their equipment on board their ships. At intervals of several months, the one-third left on the ships would rotate with one of the two-thirds that had gone home. This rotation scheme would permit regular training and reduce family separations. It would reduce our response time in an emergency by only a few days, since the equipment would all remain in the deployed ships.

Some may assume that the much advertised Rapid Deployment Force is moving us toward the capability to seize advance airfields. It is hard to know whether it is or not. The force is simply a headquarters command that would draw upon the existing forces of all four services if it had to go to war. We can hope that the force commander is developing his plans along lines similar to those proposed here.

Another essential capability for seizure of an advance airfield is enough air power to keep enemy air forces from attacking our amphibious forces and to attack opposing ground forces. Unless we can count on base rights within 300 to 400 miles, this can come only from aircraft carriers. An enlarged amphibious capability would certainly require the air support of the two aircraft carriers that have been in the Indian Ocean area since the hostage crisis. With only 12 carriers in the Navy, and allowing for repairs, overhaul and training, sustaining two in the Indian Ocean precludes maintaining the Navy's normal positioning of two in the Mediterranean and two in the Western Pacific at the same time. Having not enough to go around is the price we are paying for a policy of procuring a few giant carriers rather than many small ones.

Even more serious, with American naval power built around only 12 aircraft carriers, we are reluctant to risk them in combat. This was dramatically demonstrated during last year's hostage-rescue effort. When air support was needed well inside the Persian

Gulf, the Navy insisted on keeping its carriers outside — though the potential opposition was only the enfeebled Iranian Air Force and Navy. The capability to intervene in remote areas requires aircraft carriers that can be placed in harm's way like all other implements of war. That will be possible only when carriers are made smaller, simpler and in larger numbers.

Until such a new fleet comes into being, we can, with imagination, stretch our present capabilities. The Navy has small flight decks in its amphibious force and the Marine Corps has vertical

take-off (VSTOL) aircraft. By placing VSTOL's on all of the amphibious ships that can accommodate them, the amphibious ships that go right up to the area of the attack would carry some of the air power they need with them. American air power could be increased substantially in areas like the Persian Gulf where vulnerability may hold aircraft carriers at long range. In effect, we could develop a plan in which the large carriers in the rear provide the high-performance aircraft to protect the amphibious carriers in the forward area which, in turn, provide direct air support to the troops. Unfortunately, it is more difficult to make immediate improvements to rapid airlift, the second element of an intervention capability. The fundamental problem is the size and weight of our weapons systems. The new M-1 tank weighs more than 50 tons. Even our largest transport aircraft will be able to carry only one for any meaningful distance. The highly sophisticated F-15 fighter aircraft requires an immense amount of maintenance support to keep it running. Until we are willing to build light, fast tanks relying more on movement than mass, and simple aircraft with high-performance weapons relying more on new technologies than on traditional air combat, the load will not lighten much.

In the meantime, we can at least reduce the flying time needed to transport our heavy equipment to the scene. The way to do this is to tap our army and air forces in Europe first in an emergency, in the Persian Gulf, for example,

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rather than bringing units from the United States, as is now planned. The traditional arguments against this are understandable, but the simple fact is that flying time can be cut by a factor of three because Europe is three times closer to the Gulf. In addition, our European forces are those in the highest state of readiness.

Some have predicted that NATO will "Finlandize" (accede to Soviet pressure) if the United States diverts its attention and strength from Europe. There is no reason why this should happen. Our NATO partners would prefer that we take on the Persian Gulf responsibility as an addition to our European posture rather than reducing our forces in Europe. But we cannot increase the numbers of American forces enough to do that. Consequently, concessions must be made in NATO to permit adequate United States coverage of the Middle East, which is as much in Europe's vital interest as it is in ours. We and our allies must also recognize that the United States is essentially a maritime, not a continental, power. Thirty years of playing the role of a continental power in Europe have left us with equipment and a strategy which do not serve us, or them, adequately in other vital regions like the Persian Gulf.

This brings us to the \$64 question. How can we afford "heavy" forces to meet our European responsibilities and "light" forces for other contingencies? The simple answer is that we cannot. The reason is not financial alone. If we continue to attempt to create one set of forces for the central front in Europe and another for contingency areas like the Persian Gulf, the 50-ton tanks and sophisticated aircraft for a traditional big-power war in Europe will dominate military thinking and budgets, and contingency requirements will simply be neglected, as they are now. The long-held premise that if we are prepared for a NATO war, which is the most demanding, we can use those same types of forces to handle less demanding contingencies is wrong. Vietnam illustrated that. The Persian Gulf offers similar problems.

What we need is dual-capable equipment. This may seem less effective for Europe, but most of the changes to satisfy contingency needs would incorporate advantages of new technology that are neglected today on even our newest NATO forces. Those technologies permit us to:

- Build lighter tanks and artillery.

- Rely less on the high-performance characteristics of aircraft and more on sophisticated weapons fired from them—reducing the aircraft's size and the maintenance tail that must be airlifted to the scene.

- Build smaller aircraft carriers so that there will be more of them to spread over remote areas.

- Build more capable amphibious ships with VSTOL's.

- Build more data-processing and data-transmission capability for reconnaissance and "smart" weapons.

Emphasis on using these technologies, along with the accompanying changes in tactics, could create forces for NATO that are more flexible, more difficult to target and more responsive to changing battlefield conditions. Overall, this would lead the Department of Defense to spend its money quite differently from the way it does now. The budget amendments of this fiscal year and the next, submitted to the Congress by the Reagan Administration, do not face the issue squarely. In all fairness, it is a bit much to expect the Administration to change directions quickly. The emphasis in those amendments, however, is still on the second half of the problem—airlifting our forces to new trouble spots. Despite that, the Administration still opts for procurement of the XM-1 tank and the F-15 aircraft, which will not help at all. The first half of a sound Persian Gulf strategy, improved amphibious lift and carrier air support, is not helped by the amendments. There is a down payment on a new large aircraft carrier, but that is a mistake. The Department of Defense simply must let go of some of the traditional weap-

ons, such as large carriers, that are clearly becoming obsolete. Seriously questioning traditional systems will also mean withstanding the enormous institutional pressures within the Defense Department and the pressures from the defense industry to perpetuate what is known and understood. Both usually want to pursue the same weapons systems relentlessly, regardless of changes of strategy or technology.

The United States is the only member of the NATO alliance that can shoulder the burden of defending the Persian Gulf as well as other worldwide responsibilities, so it is vital that we accept it. Increasingly, as our undiminished dependence on third-world nations coincides with Moscow's increased assertiveness in the same regions, we will find that our vital interests are at stake in other remote areas. Our defense establishment had best be prepared to support the more assertive rhetoric of this Administration to protect those interests with effective military power. We can do that only if we realize that we are a maritime-airlift power whose military strategy must have the mobility and flexibility to meet wide-ranging and uncertain demands. Surely, we have the wisdom to recognize that our responsibilities are too broad to be fulfilled by a new "Maginot line." We have the industrial ingenuity to utilize our advanced technology to build weapons systems that can protect all of our national interests. We must start now, however, in this new direction. ■

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